

MEDIA RELEASE

Eastern Panhandle Prepares Together for Pandemic Flu

To help prepare the eastern panhandle respond at the local level in the event of a pandemic, a tabletop exercise was held recently by the Berkeley County Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) at Independent Bible Church in Hedgesville, West Virginia, drawing on the combined efforts of government officials, public health, medical, fire, EMS, community and faith-based organizations, law enforcement, as well as the private sector. "It was an invaluable event", said Jim Surkamp, Jefferson County Commissioner. "It is important that we come together to plan for pandemic influenza, cross-jurisdictionally and at all levels to share information", said Pamela Holstein-Wallace, threat preparedness coordinator for Berkeley County Health Department.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention defines an influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when a new influenza A virus appears or "emerges" in the human population, causing serious illness, and then spreads easily from person to person worldwide. "Unlike seasonal flu, it can kill the young and healthy as well as the frail and sick", said Diana Gaviria, MD, MPH, Health Officer of the Berkeley County Health Department.

In 1918, the first pandemic killed over 500,000 Americans and more than 20 million people died worldwide. The recent limited outbreak of SARS gives a hint of the dangers that a modern pandemic would present. Now spreading in birds across Asia and recently reaching into Europe, this new influenza strain has infected domesticated birds like ducks and chickens and long-range migratory birds. "As of now, avian flu is primarily an animal disease and unless people come into direct, sustained contact with infected birds, it is unlikely they will contract the disease", said Dr. Gaviria.

"One of the challenges presented by a pandemic is that scientists need a sample of the new strain before they can produce a vaccine against it", said Dr. Gaviria. Therefore, it is difficult to produce a vaccine before the pandemic actually appears. For a pandemic's first several months, there may not be a vaccine. To help protect local citizens during these early months when it is possible that no vaccine is available, the county officials in Morgan, Berkeley, and Jefferson are taking a number of immediate steps.

Unlike other natural disasters, a pandemic can happen simultaneously in hundreds, or even thousands, of locations simultaneously. "Our resources would be quickly depleted", said Holstein-Wallace. A pandemic can continue spreading destruction in repeated waves that can last for a year or more. "All levels of government must be prepared for a pandemic and it's wonderful to see our local leaders working together to plan for the health and safety of the citizens in the eastern panhandle."

For more information on how individuals and families can prepare, contact the Berkeley County Health Department at 304-263-5131 or log onto www.wvflu.org.

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